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Recommended Citation

Troy, Lisa (2006). "Knowledge Production at the Cutting Edge?: A Content Analysis of AERC Papers from 1995-2005," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/57>

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Knowledge Production at the Cutting Edge?: A Content Analysis of AERC Papers from 1995-2005

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Keywords: Content analysis, adult education research conference

Abstract: Adult Education Research Conference presentations are analyzed from 1995 through 2005 for content and authorship gender. This analysis compares findings from this time period with findings from the 1970's and the late 1980's.

Introduction

Recognizing the direction and evolution of research in any discipline is a central factor in defining that field. Research and subsequent learnings demonstrate priorities, growth, plausibility, and accountability within each discipline. The Adult Education Research Conference is considered to be on the "cutting edge" of knowledge production. This conference reflects the leadership and attitude within adult education ("About the AERC", n.d., para. 1). While some work has been done on reviewing the contents of adult education journals, handbooks and select topics within the field, (e.g. Hall, 1993; Hayes, 1992; Ng, 2003; Pipke, 1984; Sissel, 1993; Taylor, 1993; Wilson, 1992) there has been no attempt to systematically analyze presentation topics within the Adult Education Research Conference since Long (1983).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how theoretical perspectives and subject matter have evolved over the last 11 years. It is an account of how adult education is developing as a field. In doing so, the review asks the following questions: What topics have been prevalent during this time period? Has there been a significant shift in the foci? Following up on Cunningham's concerns, is the AERC allowing marginalized voices to be heard (2001, p. xi)?

Background

From the official AERC Web site, "[the proceedings] not only reflect the changing emphasis and orientation of research in adult education, but also evidence the growing diversity and maturity of the field itself" ("About the AERC", n.d., para. 6). Known for its role in promoting the "improvement of research and evaluation in adult education" while fostering professional collaboration the AERC, in its 47th year, has gone through its own transition and growth. With the AERC's history of addressing issues, the lunch and business meeting of 1992 was undoubtedly one of the most notable incidents. Cunningham (2001) and Thomson (1993) refer to the history that was made during that particular meeting "when the gatekeepers of adult education knowledge had been challenged and found wanting" (Thomson, 1993, para. 1). The revised, 25th anniversary edition of the "Black book," *Adult Education: Evolution and Achievement in a Developing Field of Study*, had been critically analyzed by the adult education community with a significant component rejecting its "Eurocentric, racist, gender insensitive, elitist, and exclusionary" (Cunningham, 2001, p. xi) content. Because of this pivotal meeting of 1992, several regular attendees discontinued their involvement with this annual conference. The most noteworthy outcome during that year's business meeting was the decision to create an alternative book that would represent the silenced voices.

From the forward of that alternative book, *Making Space: Merging Theory and Practice in Adult Education*, which debuted nine years after the conflict, Cunningham asks, “To what degree do we recognize the structure of the dominant society and its pressures to control us?” (2001, p. xiv). Thus, it becomes important to ask: Has the Adult Education Research Conference transformed into a place affording the alternative, marginalized, or silenced voices an avenue for speaking and being heard?

Review of Previous Studies

Long’s (1983) taxonomy based on the ERIC Clearinghouse index, of AERC topics includes Adult Learning, Program Planning & Administration; Institutional Sponsor, Adult Education as a Field of Study, Instructional Material & Methods; Philosophical, Program Area, Personnel & Staff; International Perspective, and Other. Research design, contributors, and institutional affiliation were also summarized. He concluded that the majority of presentations (N=355) were by American individuals “employed by 83 post-secondary institutions” (p. 81) during the 1970’s. The majority of AERC papers during that time period focused on planning, a specific program area such as ABE/ GED, or on adult education as a field of study. The issue of a presentation applying to multiple categories is not addressed in Long’s report.

Pipke (1984) and Taylor (1993) both reported on gatekeeping within the field of adult education, maintaining content classifications similar to Long (1983), while collecting data about gender of author, vocation, country of origin, and process. Pipke (1984) suggested many inconsistencies with abstracts and the process of deciding which abstract would be accepted by the steering committee from one year to the next. Taylor reviewed the *Adult Education Quarterly* (1988 – 1992), concluding that topics and authorship were not changing dramatically; quantitative research was being produced predominantly by white, American men (“Discussion and Conclusion”, 1993, para. 1). He did note that qualitative work was increasing and adult learning was, by far, the most submitted topic. Such analyses bring awareness, help define the scope of research and, just as importantly, help determine what topics are underrepresented.

Methodology

This paper is a content analysis of the AERC proceedings including the years 1995 through 2005 comparable to Long (1983) and Taylor (1993); content classifications are a compilation of their work. Ten categories are used in order to include all papers, keep the topics mutually exclusive, and make a comparison to findings about the AERC presentations from 1971-1980. These categories are:

1. Adult Development and Learning. These are theories of learning, including but not limited to: transformative and experiential; collaborative and group; self-directed or individual; and identity or self-concept.
2. Program Planning. In addition, this section includes participation and evaluation.
3. Institutional Sponsor. These papers focus on higher education, informal learning, or community groups.
4. Adult Education as a Field of Study. This category summarizes research procedures and papers on educators, trainers, mentors, etc.
5. Instructional Material, Methods, and Models.
6. Philosophical. These articles are “concerned with the rationale and principles of adult education” (Long, 1983, p. 95).

7. Program Area. This section has the most subcategories: Adult Basic Education / General Equivalency Diploma / English as a Second Language / welfare; lifelong and later life; work; women / gender / roles; American Indians, Hispanics, African Americans, Whiteness; HIV / AIDS; drugs; distance education; sexual orientation; and domestic violence / prison. Long defined this as “adult education services to a specific identified group” (1983, p. 95).

8. Personnel and Staff which consists of human resource development research.

9. International Perspective – namely globalization, global context, and immigration.

10. Other – politics / power / citizenship / civil society; religion / spirituality; disabilities; ethics / moral learning; and historical content.

During this process, all titles (N=746) were reviewed, categorized by subject, and sub-categorized with the exception of round table and symposia papers. When the title was unclear, the abstract and paper were also reviewed. Each category was then reviewed for commonalities within the papers; subcategories were employed since most papers included several topics. For stratification purposes, these papers were put into a main category based on the perceived focus. Categories were then summarized by year and across the decade. The topics under “Other” are placed there since these topics are not mentioned in Long’s analysis of the 1971 time period. This is a preliminary taxonomy that, with further development, will have refined categories.

Discussion and Conclusion

More than twice the number of papers was presented during the most recent eleven conferences when compared to the ten during the 1970’s. Females authored 54% of the papers, 29% were male authored, and 17% had multiple authors including both female and male contributors. This in comparison to Taylor’s (Findings, 1993, para. 1) results for the *Adult Education Quarterly* from 1988 through 1992 when females accounted for 26%, males 60% and dual authorship was at 14%. Ethnic information was not available for the authors of presentations. A summarization of the main categories demonstrates that, by far, topics under “Program Area” are the most researched from 1995 to 2005. ABE has remained a consistently prominent research topic, while presentations focusing on program planning have declined.

Table 1. Presentation Categories

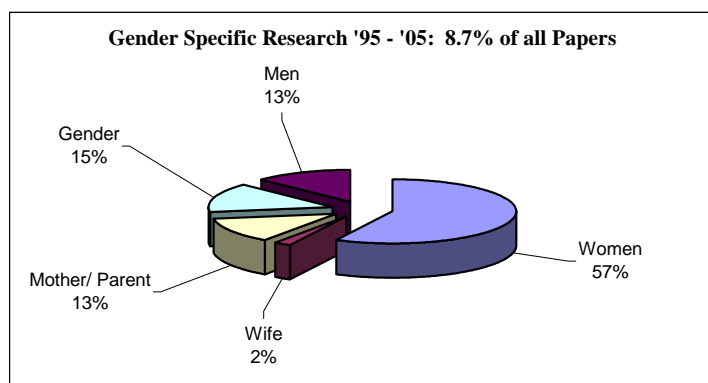
	Category	N ('95 - '05)	%	N ('71 - 80)	%
1	Adult Development	66	8.8%	43	12.1%
2	Program planning	51	6.8%	84	23.7%
3	Institutional sponsor	47	6.3%	25	7.0%
4	AE as a field of study	76	10.2%	57	16.1%
5	Methods	19	2.5%	19	5.4%
6	Philosophical	19	2.5%	2	0.6%
7	Program area	303	40.6%	99	27.9%
8	Human Resource Development	10	1.3%	11	3.1%
9	International Perspective	60	8.0%	4	1.1%
10	Other	95	12.7%	11	3.1%
		746	100%	355	100%

T-tests were used at the 0.05 level of significance to determine if the population proportions were significantly different for power, religion, ethics, distance education, sexual orientation, globalization, immigrants, later life / aging, and race. This grouping accounts for 28.5% (N = 213) of all presentations during this time period. One proportion represented 1995 through 1999; the other represented 2000 through 2005. Sexual orientation (< 2% overall) and race were the only two that did not have significantly different proportions at this alpha level. Comparatively, such individual topics were not isolated during Long's (1983) analysis with the exception of aging. Aging has represented fewer than 3% of presentations during both time periods.

Table 2. Presentation Subcategories

Category	Prevalent Sub-categories	N ('95 - '05)	%	% ('71 - 80)
7	Women/ gender/ roles	65	8.7%	1.1%
7	Work	61	8.2%	1.4%
7	ABE/ GED/ ESL/ Welfare	53	7.1%	7%
4	Educators	47	6.3%	Not explicit
9	Globalization/ Global content	35	4.7%	
7	Distance Education / technology	33	4.4%	
1	Transformative learning	32	4.3%	
7	African American / White / Race	31	4.2%	
		357	48%	

Figure 1. Gender Specific Papers.



Papers focused on the roles of father or husband during this time period. This sub-category consistently represented 8 to 10% of the yearly papers, except in 2004 when it was 17% and 2005 when it was less than 1%.

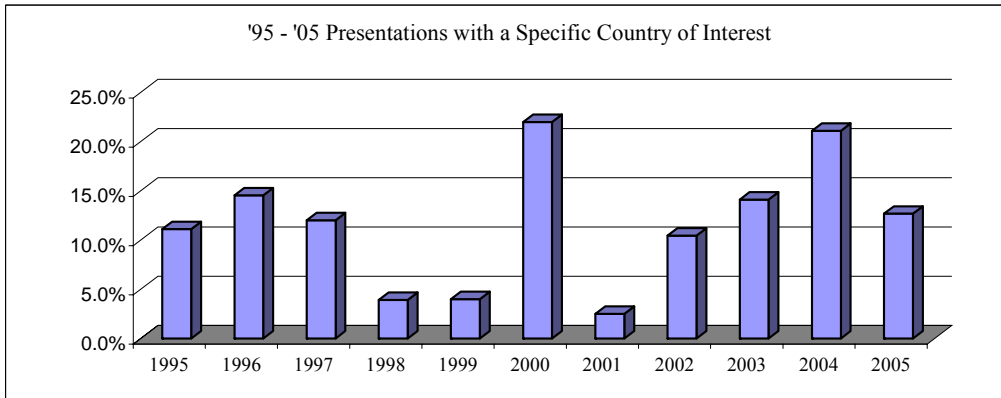
Similarly, Adult Basic Education and Adult Literacy overpower ESL, GED, and Welfare research. This category

accounted for 13% of papers in 1995, 14% in 1999 and less than 3% for 2004 and 2005. Within this category, 68% of the papers focused on ABE or literacy, 17% on welfare, 9% on ESL, and 6% on GED.

While ABE has seen a reduction over the decade, more papers are being presented with an international perspective. Ninety-four (12.6% overall) papers were sub-categorized under Specific Country of Interest, mainly from 2000 and 2004, indicating a possible growth trend. Of

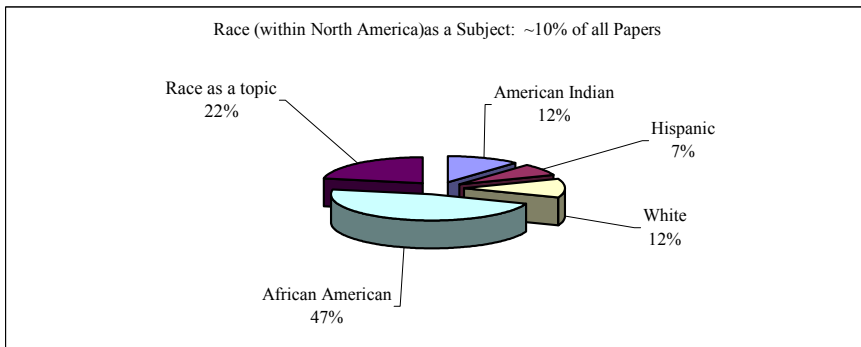
these presentations, the top areas studied outside of the United States were Canada (27.7%), Europe (18%), Asia (17%), and Africa (11.7%).

Figure 2. International presentations.



When race was taken as the primary factor and papers were pulled from all categories, nearly half of these looked specifically at African Americans. Little has been presented on other minority groups such as Hispanics, American Indians, Asians, etc.

Figure 3. Race as a subject



“Other” topics individually represented a small portion of the overall presentations while indicating some transitions within the conference. Power accounted for 3.5%, historical 3.5%, religion 2.7%, disabilities 1.9%, and moral learning 1.7%. Historical papers were predominantly found in 1995 and again in 2003, with much less representation in other years. Research involving spirituality or ethics was presented mostly from 2000 through 2004. As a secondary category, power often times was combined with program planning, women, and literacy.

Though some papers clearly have one topic of interest, the vast majority of papers could easily fit under two or more headings. The process of categorizing each paper under a single topic is an issue that needs to be addressed in future content analyses. As globalization plays its part in bringing adult research and educators together, this process of analyzing the content of the presentations needs to be repeated periodically. There have been considerable shifts in trends seen through the increase of women authorship, international perspectives, and general

diversification in comparison to the 1970's. It will be important to systematically verify that the AERC is staying on the 'cutting edge' of knowledge production and dissemination. Moreover, this process confirms that the conference continues to create an outlet for the less dominant voices within the field of adult education.

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